The Vallis gratiae Altar Frontlet : Object, Imagery and the Deconstruction of the 'Artist'

Räsänen, Elina Irmeli

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ELINA RÄSÄNEN

The *Vallis gratiae* Altar Frontlet

Object, Imagery, and Deconstruction of the 'Artist'[1]

In the year 1943 an anthology was published that celebrated the quincentennial anniversary of the Birgittine convent of *Vallis gratiae* in Naantali (Nådendal), Finland. One of the articles in this anthology was a survey of the extant textiles and embroideries connected with the convent. It was written by one of the leading medievalists of his time in Finland, the then State Archaeologist, Carl Axel Nordman.[2] Highlighted among the textiles examined was, understandably, the finest Birgittine embroidery in a Finnish collection: an altar frontlet, today exhibited in the National Museum of Finland, Helsinki (Fig. 1a–e).[3] In his contribution Nordman briefly listed the motifs depicted on the frontlet, but instead of concentrating on the iconography or thematic analysis, he focused on questions concerning its creator and dating. Nordman reached a conclusion regarding the former and wrote: 'Hypothesis becomes certainty: I think there can be no doubt that Birgitta Anundsdotter made the altar frontlet for the church of her home parish. She is, then, our first female textile artist known by name.'[4]

1. This essay is an extended version of the paper presented at the Birgitta conference in Stockholm. I am grateful for the comments I received from the conference participants and the editors of this volume. In addition, I have benefited from the advice and insightful remarks of Ville Walta, Markus Hiekkanen, Leena Svinhufvud, Aki Arponen, and Päivi Salmesvuori.
2. Nordman 1943. On Nordman and his career, see Meinander 1991; Räsänen 2007.
3. Inv. no 2372:3. The item in this article is referred to as either the Naantali or *Vallis gratiae* embroidery/altar frontlet. In Finland it is generally known as the 'altar cloth of Huittinen' (*Huittisten alttariliina*).
4. Nordman 1943, p. 170. The article was published in Finnish but republished in Swedish, in the journal *Finskt Museum* (Nordman 1944): 'Antagandet blir visshet: det tyckes mig icke finnas det minsta tvivel om, att Birgitta Anundsdotter förfärdigat brunet för

FIG. 1a: *Vallis gratiae* Altar Frontlet: Saint Birgitta and Saint Katarina of Vadstena, Meeting at the Golden Gate, Birth of the Virgin. Photo: National Museum of Finland.

Nordman's reference to an earlier hypothesis (that he now believed to have been proven correct) was not pointing to his own research, but to the contributions by the Swedish scholars Agnes Branting and Andreas Lindblom. In their seminal work on medieval textiles in Sweden from the late 1920s, they described the *Vallis gratiae* embroidery very briefly.[5] The two embroidered letters near the upper edge of the cloth, one at each end, gained their special attention: they suggested these letters are *b* and *a*, and that they refer to the initials of the nun whose hands had made the embroidery, perhaps Birgitta Anundsdotter whose

sin hemsockens kyrka. I henne ha vi således vår första till namnet kända textilkonstnärinna.' Translation into English by the author.

5. Branting and Lindblom 1928–1929 I, p. 93.

name is to be found in documents concerning the convent (Fig. 3 a–b).[6] This attribution of the embroidery to an individual, namely Birgitta Anundsdotter, has been repeated in almost every scholarly contribution that mentions the object; in the absence of more recent research – Nordman's thesis was reiterated in a posthumous publication in 1980 – it is unswervingly repeated.[7] Likewise, the concept 'first female textile artist in Finland', coined by Nordman, has lived its own life in the literature.

This essay continues the discussion about authorship by deconstructing the

6. Ibid.
7. Nordman 1980, pp. 98–99. Among many, see, for example, Pylkkänen 1978, p. 253; Klockars 1979, p. 52; Riska 1987, p. 256; Lindberg 1998, p. 50; Lindgren 2002, p. 202; Hiekkanen 2007, p. 223. Cf. Nygren (1951, pp. 66–67) who refers to the earlier studies, but does not mention the attribution. Note also Inger Estham's (1991, p. 11) plain remark that 'no [Birgittine] embroidery can be reliably attributed to any identified nun'. I have briefly touched on the authorship of the altar frontlet earlier, see Räsänen 2009, p. 92.

FIG. 1b: *Vallis gratiae* Altar Frontlet: Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple, Annunciation, Visitation. Photo: National Museum of Finland.

role of Birgitta Anundsdotter as the maker of the embroidery. In addition, it highlights this fairly little-known piece of art; apart from Nordman's relatively limited contribution in the 1940s, no research has been published on it.[8] Therefore, I am offering a description of this work in two ways: first to meet a general art historical interest and second, following Michael Baxandall's conceptual modification, to submit a representation of my thinking. For Baxandall sees a description of an art object as 'less a representation of the picture, or even a representation of seeing the picture, than a representation of thinking about

8. Surveys of Birgittine textiles in Sweden are, generally speaking, very cursory when dealing with those that survive in Finland.

having seen the picture'.[9] Baxandall's mid-1980s form of expression somewhat conveys the discursive distance from 'reality' that was then emphasized; instead of speaking of the 'real' object, the scholar was considered to mediate his or her personalized 'image' of the work in question. Although I am stressing the importance of the material, real presence of the studied object, I find Baxandall's wording inspirational: my description does not cover all the details nor seek to reveal the full materiality of the work, but rather verbalizes my thinking. The rich imagery of the altar frontlet cannot be examined here as thoroughly as it deserves, but I hope to provide some perceptions for further research.

What follows, then, is an analysis of the imagery of the embroidery with some remarks on its materiality and present condition, after which I will proceed to questions concerning the supposed authorial role of Birgitta Anundsdotter as well as the provenance of the work. From here I will move to the use of initials

9. Baxandall 1985, p. 11.

FIG. 1C: *Vallis gratiae* Altar Frontlet: Nativity, Adoration of the Magi, Presentation of Christ in the Temple. Photo: National Museum of Finland.

within the artistic products of convents in general and discuss the reciprocity of textual and visual spheres. Finally, I will briefly compare certain Birgittine embroideries remaining today in Sweden with the one in Helsinki. My thesis is that these works are even more related than has previously been realised and, consequently, the most likely origin for the *Vallis gratiae* embroidery is in Vadstena.

THINKING ABOUT THE *Vallis gratiae* EMBROIDERY AS AN OBJECT: A DESCRIPTION

The *Vallis gratiae* embroidery is a narrow band that surrounded the upper part of the altar, called *aurifrisium* in Latin; its width is 217 centimetres and height *c.* 16.5 centimetres. It depicts fourteen images in a row, separated from one an-

other by fifteen decorative columns or pillars; each pictorial scene is sheltered by a rounded arch. To these images I shall soon return. Beads or pearls were attached to the top of each column, but today none of these survive.[10] The spaces between the arches are adorned with arboreal ornaments resembling mostly oak leaves as well as images of angels with musical instruments. There is, however, no systematic order in how the nine leaf ornaments and six angels are placed.

The main materials are linen and silk: the linen cloth is embroidered with silk and couched in silver-gilt, silver thread, and wire.[11] The red background for the figures is embroidered in split stitch with fine silken thread filling in almost geometric spaces. This technique is used in many other Birgittine embroideries.[12] The cloth is damaged, particularly in the centre of its upper edge as well as at the

10. See Pylkkänen 1978, pp. 251–253.
11. Ibid.
12. The expert on Birgittine textiles, Inger Estham, describes this technique as creating a 'prism-like' pattern, see Estham 1991, p. 11.

FIG. 1d: *Vallis gratiae* Altar Frontlet: Crucifixion, Resurrection, Pentecost. Photo: National Museum of Finland.

end. It was mended in 1949 with uncoloured shappe silk which is distinctly visible, for example, in the face areas of the figures in the last two pictorial scenes.[13] A thicker red thread is also visible, which may be evidence of earlier repairs.

13. The pictures in the archives documenting the conservation process were taken in 1949 and this was probably also the year when the conservation was done. Main Record of the Historical Collection; an undated and unsigned note in the archives of the Conservation Laboratory, National Board of Antiquities, Helsinki. E-mail from conservator Aki Arponen (National Board of Antiquities, Helsinki), 7.2.2012. No recent conservation has been carried out on the textile. During my research I have had no direct access to the archives of the Conservation Laboratory of the National Board of Antiquities due to their move to temporary premises, but conservator Aki Arponen has been a great help in searching their archival material for me.

Merged with the images, the embroidery offers textual communication, too. Altogether eight bands with inscriptions are included in the pictorial spaces; these are either held by angels or represent the words of characters in the narrative. The letters are very faded and worn, but most of them are still somewhat legible. The texts have not hitherto been published.[14] The inscriptions are embroidered with goldish yellow or blue threads, colours also generally used in the pictorial scenes, except for couple of single letters in red or green. The letters *b* and *a*, already mentioned (Fig. 3a–b), are the only separate letters outside the inscription bands.

14. The palaeographer Ville Walta offered his generous help in deciphering the worn inscriptions. My remarks on them are greatly indebted to his assessments, but any possible misinterpretations are naturally mine. I hope that future research in a laboratory environment will reveal their meanings in more detail than has been possible for us now.

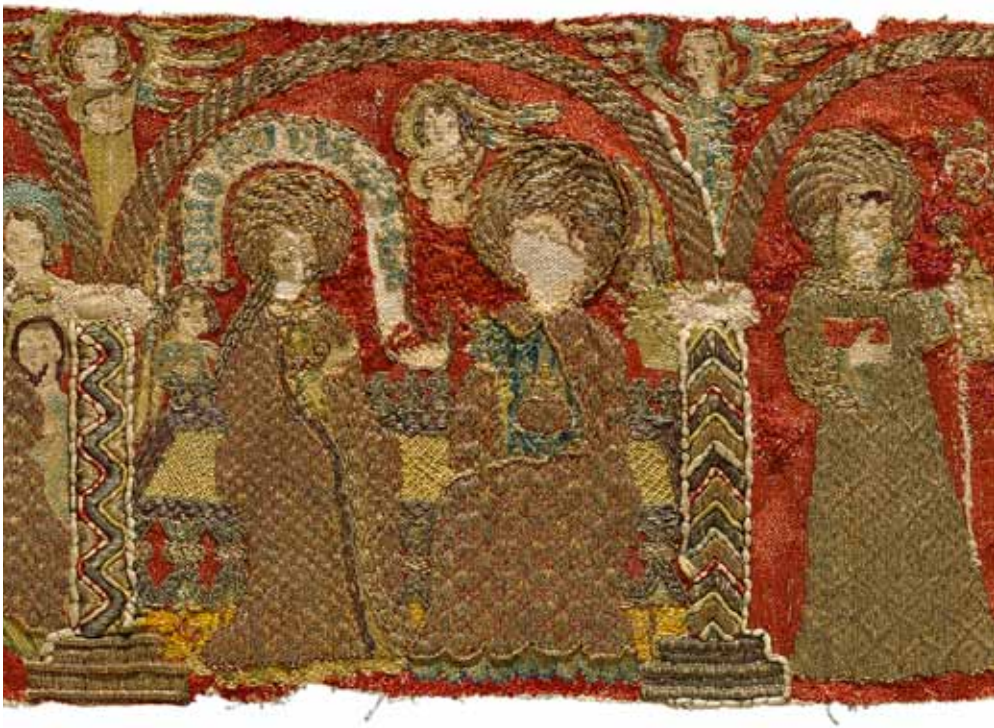

FIG. 1E: *Vallis gratiae* Altar Frontlet: Coronation of the Virgin, two male saints. Photo: National Museum of Finland.

The embroidery tells the story of the Virgin, which is intermingled with that of Christ and the overall salvation narrative of Christianity. The story begins with the prehistory of the Virgin Mary and winds up with her unification with her son in heaven. The twelve narrative motifs are the following: Meeting at the Golden Gate, Birth of the Virgin, Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple, Annunciation, Visitation, Nativity, the three Magi, Presentation of Christ in the Temple, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Pentecost, and Coronation of the Virgin. The two ends of the frontlet are, however, given to two pairs of saints distinct from the narrative: the female saints Birgitta and her daughter Katarina of Vadstena start the cycle, and it ends with two male saints, suggested tentatively

to be Saints Dominic and Francis.[15] Both of the latter are carrying books as well as holding crosiers with *sudaria*, or *panniselli*. This detail marks them as abbots, which, of course, Dominic and Francis were not, although they each founded a religious order. Typically, these two saints are not depicted with crosiers, but it may be that the suggested identification is still valid if the pictorial programme of the embroidery was aimed at emphasizing the juxtaposition of these figures with the founders of the Birgittine order, namely Birgitta and Katarina at the other end of the band. Saint Birgitta is holding her attribute, a book, in her right hand and lifts up a large cross in the other. The cross is juxtaposed with the large white virginal lilies in Katarina's right hand. With her left hand Katarina is graciously supporting her cloak. Katarina's common attribute, the deer, jumps towards her, tame as a puppy.

The second pictorial and first narrative scene depicts the meeting of Saint Anne and her husband Joachim at the Golden Gate of Jerusalem. Angels accompany the couple, which I see as a visual allusion to previous events in the story, the Annunciation of Anne and the encounter between Joachim and the angel in the desert. The angel appearing from the clouds above Saint Anne is holding a text band which curls over Joachim's head; the inscription probably contains the angel's announcement of a great joy that has entered the world.[16] Although commonly appearing in connection with the Nativity, this message is also a good fit for the occasion that marks the conception of the Virgin. Angels appear frequently in the Birgittine liturgy, and in fact, Birgittine devotion has been identified as one factor introducing the cult of the guardian angel in Eng-

15. No explanation for the identification of the male saints is offered, see Branting and Lindblom 1928–1929 I, p. 93; Nordman 1943, p. 168.
16. The letters *io vo(bis) ga* may be detected, which, then, offers the possibility of reading it as *nuntio vobis gaudium*.

land.[17] Numerous angel-like figures in the embroidery may also be understood almost as maids, suitable attendants to accompany high-ranking persons like the members of the holy family. The spouses hold each other's hands. Joachim rests his other hand on his chest as a sign of caring and love whereas Saint Anne's other hand is in an upright position, similar to Birgitta's in the previous scene. Therefore, the images of these two holy women are linked: they are dressed alike and their poses are uniform. This is no surprise, since in Nordic late medieval art Saints Anne and Birgitta are often visually very similar in their married woman's outfits.[18] Here, for instance, they both wear a wimple whereas Katarina's neck is uncovered.

The Birth of the Virgin shows Saint Anne sitting on a sumptuous bed, covered by striped counterpane, and attended by couple of chamber maids (Fig. 2). An angel hovering over the bed is waving a banner inscribed in blue: *ave regina*. Little Mary is all dressed up, and actually comes across as a miniature version not only of herself as the adult Virgin, but also of her mother Anne in the previous scene. This doubling of the mother and daughter, two holy mothers, visually attests the matrilineal lineage of Christ.[19] This approach is especially recognizable in the next setting, that is, the Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple. Mary is walking up the stairs under the eyes of her parents. She is only half the size of Saint Anne, but the identical characterization of daughter and mother is perfect – except that the Virgin's youth is expressed by the skilful embroidery of her hair in tiny golden curls, whereas Saint Anne's hair is covered by a veil.

Following the usual order of the holy cycle, the next episodes underscore Mary's pregnancy. The Annunciation illustrates the angel's greeting to the Virgin, who has turned away from her reading stand to receive the message. The angel is holding a decorative banner, as well as an inscription winding over the Virgin which says, *ave maria gracia plena*. The celebration proper of pregnancy, the Visitation, displays the two soon-to-be-mothers, Mary and Elisabeth, accompanied by two small maids. Looking closely, the beholder may have noticed the curves of their bellies, and, therefore, meditated on the first meeting of Christ and John the Baptist. The blue inscription above the Virgin is the beginning of the Canticle of Mary (Luke 1:46–55), the word *magnificat* starting with a red letter *m*, and, after a red punctuation mark, comes the word *anima*. In the

17. See Sutton and Visser-Fuchs 1997, p. 234.
18. On the similarity and relationship between Saint Anne and Saint Birgitta, see Lindgren 1990; Räsänen 2009, especially pp. 107–109.
19. Räsänen 2009, especially. p. 135.

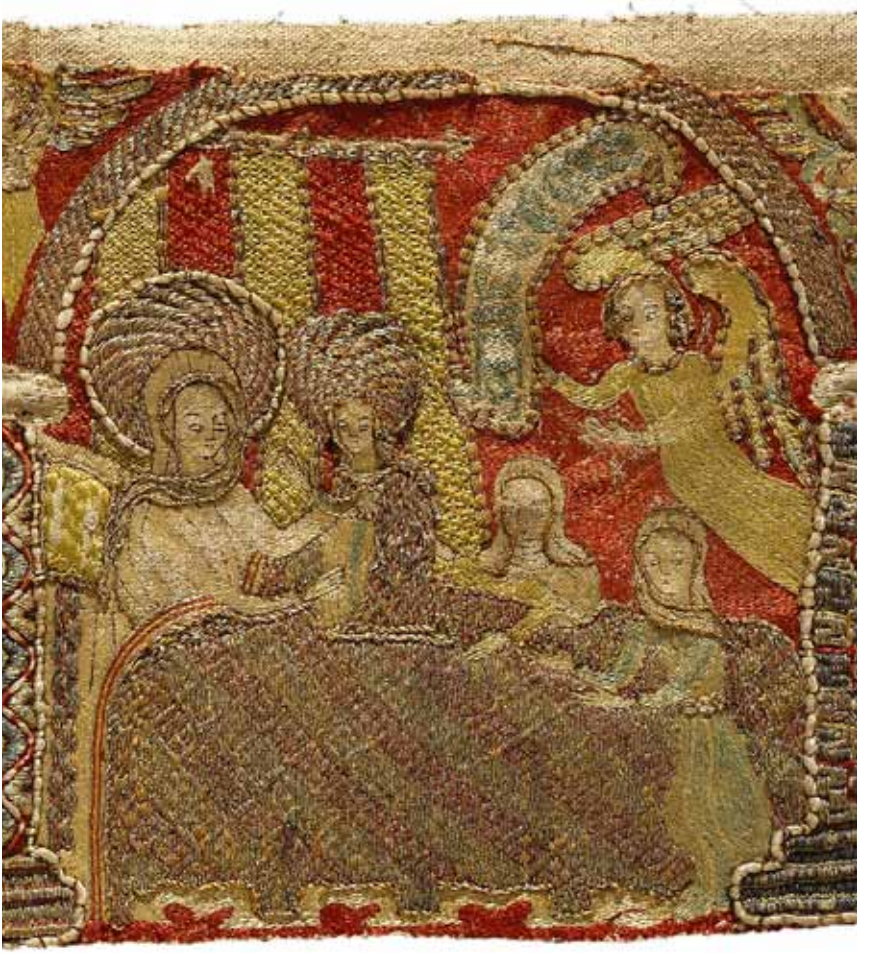

FIG. 2: *Vallis Gratiae* Altar Frontlet, detail. Birth of the Virgin.
Photo: National Museum of Finland.

inscription connected to Elisabeth one may read blessings for the Virgin and the fruit of her womb for the word *benedicta* is readable (Luke 1:42).

The image of the Nativity is quite badly damaged, and the Child is not visible anymore. In the late 1940s the seventeenth century (?) gilt silver lace attached to the lower edge was removed, as well as a golden stripe sewn onto the clothing of the Virgin Mary.[20] This stripe as well as a tiny 'cover' on the infant Jesus can still be seen in photographs of the embroidery printed in Branting and Lindblom's *magnum opus*.[21] Despite the damage, we see how the composition follows the vision of Birgitta and shows the Virgin kneeling before the infant Christ. Joseph, who appears here for the only time, is behind Mary's back wearing a large head covering, similar to Joachim's in the fourth scene. After the birth, Mary receives the three Magi in a queen-like manner, sitting on an elaborately decorated seat.

The Presentation of Christ in the Temple, or the Purification of the Virgin, shows Mary in the company of two women before the head priest, while the Christ child stands fully clothed on the altar. The cycle then proceeds to the Passion imagery. Christ's suffering on the cross is underlined by sewing the pouring blood with thick wire. In true Birgittine style, the Crucifixion depicts Mary's passion, too, by letting the sword pierce her heart. The Resurrection scene also gives space to Mary: she is witnessing how her son, wrapped in a cloak, displays his wounds in front of the empty tomb. The inscription curving between the figures reads as *salve sancta parens* ('hail, holy mother'). Pentecost is depicted following the medieval pictorial tradition which, unlike the Bible, places the Virgin Mary as the focal figure, flanked by the apostles. Lastly, the Coronation of the Virgin shows the Virgin and Christ sitting on a decorative bench, embroidered in the same manner as the Virgin's seat in the scene of the Epiphany.

The detailed treatment of the text bands is palpable: sometimes the ends are curved as if revealing the back of the bands, and thus emphasizing their free movement in space. This accords with a wider aim to manipulate and enrich the one-dimensional pictorial surface; for instance, in the Presentation of the Virgin, the stairs of the temple are adeptly executed so that the stairs are alternately blue and white, alluding to three-dimensional space and grand architecture.

20. Main Record of the Historical Collection; an undated and unsigned note in the archives of the Conservation Laboratory, National Board of Antiquities, Helsinki.
21. See the photos in plate 50 in Branting and Lindblom 1928–1929, I.

FIG. 3 a–b: Details of the *Vallis gratiae* Altar Frontlet: letters *b* and *a* at each end of the frontlet. Photo: National Museum of Finland.

THE FIRST FEMALE TEXTILE ARTIST IN FINLAND?

What do we know of Birgitta Anundsdotter, the assumed creator of the embroidery, then? She was ordained in the *Vallis gratiae* convent in 1449, as can be deduced from a letter of donation composed on 3 August that year by Birgitta's mother, the widow Rikissa Olofsdotter. The document testifies to the transfer of the estate of Karhiniemi, Rikissa's inherited landed property, for her daughter's *provent*.[22] Already couple of days earlier Birgitta's brother (or half-brother), Olaf Kusta, had donated a property which was part of his inheritance from his father, a field in Lietsala, Raisio (Reso) for the same purpose.[23] Olaf was a priest in Turku Cathedral, a prebendary of the altar of Saint John the Baptist.[24] These two documents are the only ones relating to Birgitta Anundsdotter, but they are enough to confirm that she belonged to a wealthy burgher family; Birgit Klockars has suggested that Birgitta's father and Rikissa's late husband, Anund Niklisson, might have been the same man who in another document is mentioned as mayor of the town of Ulvila (Ulfsby).[25]

22. FMU 2808. Nordman 1943, p. 170. On Rikissa Olofsdotter and Birgitta Anundsdotter, see Klockars 1979, pp. 52–53; Anthoni 1970, pp. 352–353; Leinberg 1890, p. 312.
23. FMU 2807.
24. Leinberg 1890, p. 312.
25. Klockars 1979, p. 52.

How could Birgitta have made the embroidery *for* the church of her home parish, as Nordman suggested? Who gave money for the expensive threads? Who would have donated the expensive item which had taken her hours and hours of work inside the convent? Undoubtedly Birgitta, like most of the other sisters, did handiwork in Naantali and in so doing they were following Saint Birgitta's explicit orders. As has been pointed out, some sisters in Vadstena are even mentioned as especially skilled in embroidery or sewing.[26] There is material evidence for sewing too; recent archaeological excavations around Naantali church have revealed items such as a crochet hook, a bronze needle, scissors, spindles and thimbles.[27] However, it is likely that the ordinary sisters would not have considered their work to be *theirs*, but belonging to the convent. This must particularly have applied to items meant for the altars. The *Regula Salvatoris* explicitly forbids private ownership, as well as touching gold or silver except in embroidery, and even then it must be supervised by the abbess.[28]

Nordman's determination to identify 'the first female textile artist in Finland' needs to be historicized. He seems to have been content to find a female counterpart to those then-numerous constructed master-names given to male woodcarvers. He himself had been active in this pursuit when doing his long-term, and in many ways invaluable, research on medieval wood sculpture in Finland. He had identified such 'masters' as the 'master of Kaarina', 'master of Ulvila', 'master of Sääksmäki' and so forth.[29] In recent decades assumptions concerning certain masters have been drastically challenged and several made-up personalities have been deconstructed.[30] From one angle it might be said that Nordman's declaration was sympathetic; it definitely preceded the first feminist wave in art history which searched for the forgotten female artists of the past. Textile art was a convenient field for giving credit to women, too, as it was a branch of the arts that was at the time, in the 1940s, considered to be mainly women's arena – though this was not the case in pre-modern times. In Finland, during the decades before the Second World War, a good number of female textile designers and weavers emerged.[31] Moreover, amid the art historical

26. See von Bonsdorff and Kempff 1990, p. 283; Estham 2003, pp. 334–335, Sandgren 2006, p. 110.
27. Väisänen 2011.
28. Birgitta, Reg. Salv. 2. See also Lundén 1959, p. 16; Carlquist 2007, p. 63. On nuns' handiwork, its restrictions as well as the purchasing of materials for art production in Benedictine and Dominican convents, see Hamburger 1997, pp. 177–211.
29. See Nordman 1965.
30. See, for example, Kempff 1994; von Bonsdorff 1999.
31. See Svinhufvud 2009.

contextualization of Nordman's claim, the acute historical circumstances should not be dismissed. He was writing in the midst of the war when men were fighting the enemy on the front and women doing their share at home.

THE CONVENT AND THE HUITTINEN PARISH

As mentioned earlier, it was Branting and Lindblom who originally presented the idea of linking Birgitta Anundsdotter with the embroidery due to the letters *b* and *a*. Nordman continued the research: he did not settle for the evidence offered by the embroidery itself, but searched for written documents and archives to support the case. Branting and Lindblom had not known the provenance of the work, but Nordman learned from the archives that it was donated to the Finnish Antiquarian Society in October 1885 from Huittinen (Vittis).[32] As the documents made clear, the Karhiniemi estate, Rikissa Olafsdotter's landed property and Birgitta's provent, was situated in the parish of Huittinen; even today one of the local villages is called Karhiniemi. The name of the donor of the embroidery in the records is E. J. K. Grönroos, and he is to be identified with the assistant vicar of the parish of Huittinen, Ernst Johan Konstantin Luoma, who 'Finnicized' his family name following the Fennoman ideals of the time.[33] This young priest had studied in Helsinki and perhaps already had connections with the Antiquarian Society. The collection of the Society later became part of the collections of the National Museum of Finland.

The altar frontlet was, at the latest, removed from the altar when the whole church, including the interior, went through a major renovation during the years 1877–1878.[34] At the time a new altarpiece was acquired to meet the demand that it should be 'up to date'.[35] This could indicate the old-fashioned character of the then-present altar arrangement, containing the altarpiece from 1753[36] and perhaps also the medieval altar frontlet. Several medieval wooden sculptures, including images of Saint Henrik, Saint George and the Virgin, had probably already been lost in a fire in 1783.[37] When the church was again being renovated in the late 1890s, a medieval textile fragment was found among some rubbish:

32. Main Record of the Historical Collection, National Board of Antiquities, Helsinki. (Vittis: in earlier literature written 'Hvittis'.)
33. On the history of Huittinen parish, see Viikki 1989, p. 395.
34. The whole interior was demolished and replaced with benches, altarpiece, lecterns, pulpit etc. designed by the county architect C. J. von Heideken. See the detailed analysis of the restoration works in Huittinen parish church in Valkeapää 2000, *passim*.
35. Valkeapää 2000, p. 58, n. 30 and p. 61.
36. The dating of the old altarpiece from Hiekkanen 2007, pp. 222–223.
37. Nordman 1965, p. 635; Hiekkanen 2007, p. 223.

a cross detached from a chasuble bearing an image of the Virgin standing on a crescent moon, but it does not, in stylistic terms, bear any indications of Birgittine origin.[38]

Regardless of the later fate of the Naantali embroidery, we cannot confirm it was in Huittinen at all in the Middle Ages. It is possible that it was sold after the Reformation when the Naantali convent ran out of money. We know that Vadstena abbey had to trade its textiles,[39] and without doubt this also happened in the daughter-convent. The list of the possessions of the convent from 1530 includes very few textiles: it only mentions two chasubles and four copes,[40] which might not, however, be all they had. What is more, we cannot maintain that Huittinen was Birgitta's 'home parish', as Nordman put it. The land was her mother's property, and it was not common that a couple, in this case Rikissa Olafsdotter and Anund Niklisson, would have decided to live on the wife's inherited land. On the contrary, this land was considered as an investment property which was easy to sell, deposit, or exchange if needed.[41] And indeed this was what happened when the estate was traded for Birgitta's livelihood inside the convent. Furthermore, other parts of the same estate were used in a similar way when roughly a year later Rikissa's sister, Kristina Olafsdotter with her husband Sven Spinke exchanged Kristina's share of the property with certain land located in Ulvila.[42]

The link to Huittinen parish was, however, developed even further by Nordman. Drawing on the construction history of the church, and following the paradigm of the era, he believed that the stone church was rebuilt in the mid-1490s and, therefore, suggested that the embroidery was donated on the same occasion.[43] Nordman was willing to stand with the attribution although Birgitta Anundsdotter would then have already been in her seventies and dating the embroidery as late as the 1490s made him a little uncomfortable.[44] According

38. Gröhn 2000, p. 93. Gröhn connects it with the style of Danzig. The item (inv. no. NM 32008) was not donated to the National Museum until 1932. Main Record of the Historical Collection, National Board of Antiquities, Helsinki.
39. On textiles sold from Vadstena, see Estham 1984, p. 27; 1991, pp. 10 –11; von Bonsdorff and Kempff 1990, p. 284.
40. *Suomen kirkot – Finlands kyrkor* 1972, p. 72.
41. See, for example, Lahtinen 2004.
42. FMU 2850. See Klockars 1979, p. 53. Lahtinen (2000, pp. 49–50) uses this transaction as an example of understanding the wife's land as the property of both spouses, even if it is mentioned as her inherited property.
43. Nordman 1943, p. 171.
44. Ibid.

to current research, the stone church of Huittinen was not built before *c.* 1500.[45] This, of course, would not theoretically preclude the donation of the embroidery to the prior, wooden churches of the parish, but it does weaken Nordman's assumption. It is evident that the construction of the stone church has no relevance to the dating of the embroidery.

THE AUTHOR'S INITIALS, AND THE INTERACTION OF IMAGE-MAKING AND LITERACY

Let us look for a moment at the important letters *b* and *a*. It is not rare to find the 'signature' of a sister working as a scribe in the form of her initials in Birgittine manuscripts.[46] The initials – also of those sisters who owned the book – are either placed very noticeably, for instance at the head of the page, or they are somewhat hidden in other decorative elements such as the hooks of marginal stems.[47] The manifold connections between Birgittine manuscript illuminations and textiles have not gone unnoticed; for instance, some manuscripts contain textile 'curtains' or have been mended with threads.[48] Moreover, illuminations have been brought forward as the foremost examples for the forms and styles used in the embroideries.[49] And vice versa: in the past, male scholars claimed that the manuscript illuminations executed by the sisters were too 'embroidery-like' due to their disparaging attitudes towards embroidery as female activity.[50] But it is not only the illuminations that were tied to the embroideries, but the textual tradition practised as a whole. This is best manifested in the form of the inscription bands in the images, as we have seen. Indeed, because of the tight connection between the production of manuscripts and textiles, Jonas Carlquist sees the art of embroidery as a literate endeavour, and conceptually includes it in the field of his study, the textual world of the Birgittine sisters.[51] We do talk about 'reading' images, too, but looking from another angle, that of visuality, we could argue that various mental and pictorial images as well as the prevailing visual culture in general greatly affected the selection and usage of words. Textual and pictorial forms of representation, both very much determined by the concept of material culture, worked interactively in convent life – and in the human mind.

45. Hiekkanen 2007, p. 221.
46. See, for example, Sandgren 2006; 2010; Carlquist 2007.
47. See the examples by, for instance, the scribe Christina Hansdotter Brask presented in Sandgren 2010.
48. Ibid., especially p. 144.
49. Estham 1984; 1991, p. 13.
50. For details, see Sandgren 2006, p. 117.
51. Carlquist 2007, p. 64.

In this respect, it is useful to pay attention to the completely worn inscription in the Crucifixion scene of the Naantali embroidery, for we can now see the blackish forms of letters onto which the threads were later sewn. The scribes might have carried out some of the preparatory work for those sisters who had the expertise in embroidery by sketching patterns – and letters – onto the cloth. That is if they were separate persons in the first place. At the very least they probably worked in the same premises.[52] The question arises: if the patterns for the designs were copied from manuscripts, was the manner of adding one's initials too?

In general, initials or other 'signatures' were not much used in female convents; Jeffrey Hamburger presents only one single surviving drawing, *Nonnenarbeit*, with a name of the *malerin*.[53] However, an example of a nun indicating her craftsmanship in a textile is to be found in a frontal band from the early 1300s, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. This band contains an inscription in gold: *In hora mortis succurre nobis Domine* ("In the hour of our death, help us, Lord"), but on the linen lining at the back side there was another inscription (now only readable via the holes of the stitches): *DOMNA IOHANNA BEVERLAI MONACA ME FECIT*.[54] Thus, it informs us that sister Joan of Beverly made it. Nonetheless, this example is geographically as well as chronologically removed from the Birgittine circles of the late fifteenth century; it is also in several other ways very different from the one focused in this article. First, in the Naantali embroidery the letters are on the front of the band, not hidden on the back; second, they are pictorially connected to the other forms in the embroidery and thus the nun would have, symbolically, placed herself *inside* the holy happenings. Although common in the images of rich and powerful donors and their coats of arms, intermingling publicly and personally with holy figures would be an unlikely pattern of behaviour for an ordinary sister. In the case of the Naantali embroidery, the initials are not even side by side but actually would have begun and closed the cycle, as if framing the whole sacred history.

The Birgittine manuscripts containing female scribes' initials were not for everyone to see, and many of them are to be found in personal prayer books. On the contrary, the Naantali altar frontlet was not a personal item, but embel-

52. Ibid.
53. Hamburger 1997, pp. 184–185.
54. See King 1987, p. 159. (Height: 9.5 cm, width: 261 cm.) For the object see also the V&A collection data-base http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O111536/frontal-band/ (30.7.2012).

lished the altar. Unfortunately it is now impossible to determine how visible the frontlet was for different groups of the community or for ordinary visitors to the convent church. Very little is known about the medieval altars in Naantali, and nothing of their measurements,[55] so one cannot compare the length of the cloth to any measurements of existing or even known structures. It would, then, be more justified to see the letters referring to the devotional context of the work, say, *a* referring to Saint Anne and *b* to Saint Birgitta. In fact, the letters *A* and *B* on another Birgittine textile, the Lokalahti embroidery were connected by Nordman to these holy figures.[56] In turn, the letters on the yet another fragmentary Birgittine silk embroidery were suggested by Nordman to be the initials of a noble lady, Lucia Olofsdotter.[57] Branting and Lindblom also present several suggestions for nuns' initials on various textiles, and according to Lindblom, 'it is highly interesting that the sisters more than seldom signed their work'.[58] Even obvious references to the Virgin Mary, like the letters *IA*, have been interpreted to indicate the sister Ingrid Ambjörnsdotter.[59] All in all, the older literature appears to be somewhat hazardous when it comes to interpreting the letters as devotional or personalized, but it must be remembered that each artefact has its own visual appearance and functional purpose. Interpretations deriving from liturgical texts, prayers, or from the names of the holy figures have nonetheless been more prominently proposed for the letters in Birgittine embroideries.[60]

DISCURSIVE EMBROIDERIES

The dating of the Naantali embroidery remains unspecified. The two similar narrow altar frontlets from Vadstena Abbey with the narrative cycle and saints are generally dated only vaguely to the fifteenth century.[61] At this point, without radiocarbon analysis, it is not possible to give a more precise dating, but based on stylistic and historical judgment it may be asserted that they belong approximately to the middle of the fifteenth century.

55. See Lilius 1969; Hiekkanen 2007, p. 113.
56. National Museum of Finland, Helsinki, inv. nr. 1997:5. Nordman 1943, p. 174.
57. National Museum of Finland, Helsinki, inv. nr. 5633:30. Nordman 1943, pp. 172–173; 1980, pp. 102–103. On this embroidery, see also Geijer 1936.
58. Lindblom 1944, p. 294.
59. Ibid., pp. 293–94. In this Vadstena altar frontlet (the one with the Apocalyptic Mary in the centre, c. 1500) the letters are mixed with floral ornamentation so even if the textile is meant for the altar, the letters do not stand out, but instead – and unlike in the Naantali frontlet – they resemble the placing of initials in the prayer books.
60. Estham 1984, pp. 34–35.
61. See Estham 1983, p. 120; 1984, p. 39; 1991, p. 22.

The resemblance of the *Vallis gratiae* embroidery to the Birgittine altar frontlet extant in Vadstena has long been noticed.[62] Branting and Lindblom considered the one in Helsinki to be less fine than the one today exhibited in the Sancta Birgitta Klostermuseum in Vadstena; they commented, 'style is heavier and the forms rougher'.[63] It is quite true that the one in Vadstena is more elaborate, but the statement may also reflect their view on what they thought was a product of the periphery. In fact, when it comes to delicateness vs. 'simplicity' the Naantali altar frontlet may be situated in the middle of a continuum between the work in Vadstena and the Birgittine altar frontlet now in the collections of the Statens Historiska Museum in Stockholm.[64] There are also fragmentary embroideries which are considered to belong more or less to this same stylistic group and which were thought to have been attached to an alb, or other liturgical vestment.[65] These are four pieces of linen with two images – devotional and narrative subjects under arches – on each piece. This set and the three altar frontals are far from identical in their imagery and details, but they have many interesting similarities.

The embroidery on display in Vadstena consists of twelve pictorial scenes under round-arched arcades. The spandrels have arboreal motifs, but no angels as in the Naantali frontlet. The Christian narrative begins in the very first image showing Joachim meeting the angel in the desert, and in the following, the lamenting Anne greets the angel in her garden. As was earlier argued, the *Vallis gratiae* embroidery only alluded to these events in the scene depicting the Meeting of Saint Anne and Joachim at the Golden Gate. Instead of having a pair of saints on each end of the frontlet, the Vadstena work has two pairs at the right end.

The embroidery now in Stockholm is likewise a narrow strip containing pictorial scenes (originally twelve) under arches. In this work the Nativity scene shows the infant Christ surrounded by beads, and without doubt this was the case in the *Vallis gratiae* embroidery too. As mentioned, the figure of the Christ child is now completely lost, but the extraordinarily bad condition of that area may indeed be explained by the missing beads that were around the figure. The

62. See, for example, Branting and Lindblom 1928–1929, I, p. 93, xii; Geijer 1936, p. 12; Nordman 1943, p. 170, Estham 2003, p. 344.
63. Branting and Lindblom 1928–1929, I, p. 93: 'stilen är tyngre och formerna grövre'.
64. Inv. no 23022:7. On these two embroideries, see Branting and Lindblom 1928–1929, I, pp. 92–93, plates 48–49, xii; Estham 1983, pp. 119–120; 1984, pp. 38–39; 1991, pp. 22–23; 2003, pp. 343–344.
65. Statens Historiska Museum, Stockholm, inv. no 23022:8a–d. Branting and Lindblom 1928–1929, I, plate 48, xii.

FIG. 4: Vadstena Altar Frontlet, detail. Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple. Photo: Elina Räsänen.

beads, of course, would have been valuable items and thus they were detached from the fabric at some point. The third comparative work, the decorations for the alb, has four images that do not exist in the frontlets, namely the Throne of Grace, Pietà, the Apocalyptic Mary, and a depiction of the two other Marys, the daughters of Saint Anne, with their offspring. The devotional image which is depicted in the two frontlets in Sweden, Saint Anne with the Virgin and Child (*Anna självtredje*), is not included in this, or in the *Vallis gratiae* frontlet.

The embroideries are, in fact, almost discursive, as if they add to and comment the varied pictorial decisions in each one of them. One is tempted to see the variations, such as 'switching' the characters in the motifs, almost as deliberate. For instance, the embroidery in Vadstena shows Saint Anne alone escorting her daughter to the Temple, and the 'missing' male character Joachim is there 'replaced' by another male, the head priest receiving the Virgin in the Temple who, again, is not portrayed in the Naantali work (Fig. 4). Accordingly, the Birth of the Virgin in the Vadstena frontlet has only one maid instead of the two that are present in the Naantali work, but here Joachim has entered the chamber. I am suggesting, then, that the Naantali frontlet was in fact either made in Vadstena, and that the sisters who came to *Vallis gratiae* convent brought it along – or, it was embroidered in Finland based on knowledge and models of the then extant embroideries in Vadstena.

Considering the placement of the letters *b* and *a* at the two ends, and on the visible side of the Naantali altar frontlet, as well as its function as an altar decoration we should be cautious of linking the letters to any individual, such as Birgitta Anundsdotter. Rather, it is likely that these letters are semantic representations of the same holy figures that we can see as visual representations in the embroidery. This emphasizes the intertwined, reciprocal relationship between images and words, visual and textual/verbal traditions. Finally, the 'certainty' which C.A. Nordman articulated when he published the new information testifying for Birgitta Anundsdotter's authorship some seventy years ago twists back into a hypothesis, again.

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